

Cuban Exiles

By Stephen Leshner

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MIAMI—Four years ago, when the government in Washington arranged with the government in Havana to airlift some 3,500 Cuban refugees to Miami every month, many Miamians warned darkly of a massive civic disaster.

The city, they predicted, would be unable to assimilate the flood of Cubans—the largest immigrant invasion of a single U.S. city since the 1920s. Mass unemployment was forecast. The governor of Florida envisioned “economic chaos.”

Still, the Cubans came, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the contents of one small satchel (all money was confiscated by the Castro government before the emigrants departed). Some were settled in cities far from Miami, but many found their way back to town anyway.

Today, there are 225,000 Cuban exiles in Miami—nearly a quarter the entire population—and they are thoroughly confounding all those who foresaw the doom of a city. They are flourishing. In 1962, more than half the Cubans living in Dade County were on welfare; now that figure is down fewer than 1 in 10.

More significantly, they have provided Miami with an unexpected boon from the Cold War, for they are contributing as much, if not more than they receive. They have added an estimated \$350 million a year

to the area's economy and have created a pool of skilled labor that many analysts believe is largely responsible for the rise in local industrial development and investment.

They are also altering the character and life style of rootless, superficial, hodgepodge Miami, transforming it into a city with a Latin heart.

“We used to be a town of transients without any specific culture base,” says a lifelong resident. “Now the Cubans, with their language and musicality and special foods, are giving Miami what the Creoles gave to New Orleans—a special sense of identity.”

Until a few years ago, Miami's historic Tamiami Trail on the southwest side of town was a decrepit, ravaged dump. Now it is a noisy, busy, colorful Cuban enclave called “Little Havana.” But the Cubans' influence is spreading far beyond that neighborhood.

Everywhere in Miami, “buenas noches” and “gracias” are heard as frequently as “good evening” and “thanks.” Three radio stations and eight newspapers blare their messages entirely in Spanish. Many stores sport signs saying, “English spoken here.”

And as the football season opened this fall, the backfield at Miami High consisted of Alayeto, Arocha, Rodriguez and Smith.

The exiles have built success from the one thing Miami gave them that Cuba did not: the freedom to exercise their prodigious capacities for labor. Working days, nights and weekends, they have come to own or manage more than 6,000 businesses in Miami, or 31 per cent of the total.

Some Cubans have become rich, and on American terms. Raymond Molina came to Miami 10 years ago, aged 25, with a wife, three children and \$300. Last year, his income as a real-estate developer was \$43,000.

Two exiles are presidents of banks, and nearly every major bank or financial concern has at least one Cuban vice president. Fifty-nine major companies have moved their Latin American headquarters to the area because of the bilingual work force in Dade County.